

# Student Panel Discussion

*Professor David Rolph Seely, moderator*

*April Giddings Cobb*

*Julie Jenkins Elcock*

*Heidi Hatch Gilbert*

*Christopher Meldrum*

*Raven Alard Ngatuvai*

*Richard Reber*

## Seely

The Jerusalem Center has lots of different functions, but it was made for students. Our family has been there both at times when the Jerusalem Center was closed to students and when it had students in residence. There's nothing emptier or sadder than the Jerusalem Center without students.

Students come to the Center with different ambitions. They come as young people to have fun. They come as travelers to find adventure, exploring the foreign and exotic places in the Holy Land. They come to learn about the ancient Near East and the history, culture, and religious beliefs of the Christians, Jews, and Muslims. They come as guests to encounter the gracious peoples who inhabit the Holy Land. They come as students to read and study the scriptures. Significantly, they come as pilgrims searching for experience and insight into the sacred, with hopes that their hearts can be changed. They come to walk in the footsteps of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Kings David and Solomon; the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Lehi; and the Apostles Peter and Paul. Most importantly, they come as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ to heed his admonition, as he told his ancient Apostles, "Come and see" (John 1:39). Our students come to see and hear and smell and touch and feel and experience the Spirit. They come to the land where he walked in order to learn to walk in his footsteps.

Today, in the spirit of pilgrimage, we have gathered to share our stories, our stories of encountering the Holy Land through the Jerusalem Center. We are going to start this panel discussion by introducing ourselves. We have three students from the Jerusalem Center programs

from 1990 through 2000 and three from programs after 2007. I will introduce myself and then ask each of them to introduce themselves.

I'm David Seely. I teach ancient scripture at BYU, and I love students and the Jerusalem Center program. My relationship with BYU's Jerusalem Center goes back a bit. In 1978, I wrote a letter to a charming young woman I was smitten with at work, and the address said "Jerusalem Study Abroad, Ramat Rachel." Miraculously, she wrote me back, and since then we have been to the Holy Land together with our children five times to experience pilgrimages with the students at the Center. We have helped shepherd fifteen student groups, and we have both served as Center faculty. Each of our four children has had a chance to be a student at the Center. We go because we love the land, we love the scriptures, and we love the students, and in the process of this experience, we have learned to better love each other.

### **Cobb**

I'm April Giddings Cobb, and I went on the Jerusalem Center program in 1993. I don't really remember why I wanted to go. It was really overshadowed by the fact that I didn't think I would be able to go because I had an inactive family. I didn't think that my dad would want me to go or pay for me to go. So I fasted and prayed and was super scared to approach him. But, without hesitation, he said that I could go and he would pay. So it was another "Jerusalem miracle," as Professor Jeff Chadwick would say. And it turned out to be one of the best things that has happened to me.

### **Elcock**

Marhaba—Shalom! My name is Julie Jenkins Elcock. My first introduction to the Holy Land was tied to my parents. My father worked with the Church Educational System, and he and my mother went to Jerusalem when I was age four. There was a lot of talk while I was growing up about the Holy Land and the biblical sites. I had an infatuation with the pyramids in Egypt, which they also visited. My infatuation turned into an acceptance letter to the winter 1994 program. Ironically, the trip to Egypt was cancelled, but Israel did not disappoint. It exceeded all my expectations.

### **Gilbert**

My name is Heidi Hatch Gilbert. I am from Idaho and now live in Orem, Utah. I went to Jerusalem in 2008 because of a strong impression that I was supposed to go. My travel experience at the time consisted of

camping in the mountains of Idaho—obviously quite limited. I was in my last year at BYU and had a friend who had recently come back from the Center. As he talked about his Jerusalem Center experience, I was so captivated! I hadn't heard about Jerusalem Center programs. I asked question after question, and for six hours he showed me pictures and shared his experiences, and I couldn't get enough. As he talked, I knew in my heart that I was supposed to find a way to go. I was concerned about the finances, but doors were opened to make it possible. When God gives us direction, he truly does provide a way.

### **Meldrum**

My name is Christopher Meldrum. The reason I attended the Jerusalem Center is that I've always been a history buff and have loved seeing the places where great historical events happened. I was a Classics major at BYU, so when I heard the Center was reopening, the opportunity to be in the Holy Land and see some of the great sites associated with the Bible and Greco-Roman history was just too irresistible to pass up. Studying at the Jerusalem Center went straight to the top of the list of things I was going to do before I left BYU. Furthermore, I figured that if I had to take a New Testament class to graduate, what better place to do it than in the Holy Land itself? So I jumped at the opportunity to submit my application. It was my last semester at BYU, and this was a wonderful end to my undergraduate experience. I was there in the summer of 2010 and was fortunate to be among the second summer groups to have the full semester-long program, for which I will always be thankful, as it really did make a difference having that much time to be at the Center.

### **Ngatuvai**

My name is Raven Ngatuvai. My maiden name was Alard. I am from Provo, Utah. From afar, Jerusalem seemed very exotic, and from a young age I've wanted to go to exotic places. I was fascinated with ancient civilizations, particularly in the Middle East, and Egypt specifically. It was clear that I would need to leave Provo to go somewhere like that. When I heard about the Jerusalem Center program, I realized what the BYU welcome sign "The world is our campus" really meant and was determined to go. With great gratitude, I went in 2009.

### **Reber**

My name is Rick Reber, and I live in Sandy, Utah. If I were to be honest as to why I went on study abroad, it was because there was a three-to-one

girl-to-guy ratio. Just kidding. I actually saw a picture of the Jerusalem Center on a brochure that a missionary companion of mine showed me right after we'd returned from our missions. He said, "Let's go here," and I was drawn to the Jerusalem Center from that moment on. He wasn't able to go, and I shelved the idea for about a year. I had another friend ask, "Have you ever heard of the BYU Jerusalem Center?" I said, "Yeah, I have, and I want to go." He said, "Well, let's go." We then decided we probably couldn't afford it, so we would apply for student financial aid. If we got some, we would go. Unfortunately, neither one of us got financial aid, and it looked like the semester abroad was going to be delayed again. I really felt compelled to not give up, however, and soon the Spirit was whispering, "Rick, make it happen." I decided to make it happen and went in the fall of 1993.



### **Seely**

As you know, in the Jerusalem Center program, we stay for the semester in a beautiful building on Mount Scopus. We live, we eat, we work, we play, we study, we go to church, we socialize in the Center. Would each of you share two or three of your favorite memories about the Center itself?

### **Cobb**

My favorite memories from the Jerusalem Center aren't so much specific things, because I can think of a laundry list of all the unique activities at the Center—I think it was more the way things were done. Activities at the Center were much different than living in Provo and going to school at the BYU campus. In Jerusalem, it was common that when we would go to a dance, go to a talent show, or go out to press olives, our professors and often their families were there. There was something really special about the way we bonded through these activities in such a unique setting. It was kind of like being on the Love Boat, but you couldn't pair off. Everybody did everything together. You ate at the captain's table, so to speak. I loved that aspect of the Center. When I returned to campus and would take a class from a Jerusalem Center professor, that special bond with all the members of the class wasn't present. I then realized how lucky we had been. The whole experience promoted bonding and the feeling that nobody was left out. Everybody was always invited to each activity no matter what was going on. No one had to feel uneasy about whether they were welcome. Nobody was ever excluded.

There was no awkwardness. We were all on that boat together, and we were all going toward the same destination. That made it really special.

### **Elcock**

For me, the experiences in the Jerusalem Center had to do with people. I remember standing in the Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv in a sea of 170 students. I remember thinking, “How in the world am I going to get to know these people who seem so different from me, let alone their names?” Fast forward four months. Toward the end of the winter semester, we had an activity in the Forum where someone in front would hold up items borrowed from students: a ball cap, a tee shirt, tennis shoes. We were to guess who the item belonged to. One by one, as each item was displayed, all the students would quickly yell out in unison the name of the owner. This was a testament to how much time we shared with each other and how well we knew each other by the end of the program. These strangers whom I thought I had nothing in common with at the beginning became my friends, my confidants, and my future roommates, and truly this was what shaped my experiences at the Jerusalem Center. It was the people.

### **Gilbert**

One of the best life lessons I have learned happened during those four months in the Center with our group of eighty-one students: when we give people more than one chance to really get to know who they are, there is something to treasure in every human. At the Center, you live together, eat together, go to class together, go on excursions and field trips together—you’re literally always together. This was the best environment to foster relationships with people you wouldn’t probably normally connect with, largely because you were basically forced to spend time with the entire group, regardless of first impressions or small irritations with people. You continued to give every person second and third and seventh chances, and because of that you began to see past each other’s quirks, to even appreciate those quirks, and to allow real friendships to happen. It’s powerful!

And, of course, we had so many spiritual experiences at the Center; how could we not? One that has stayed with me was spending an hour learning from Professor Andrew Skinner about the triclinium (the table with three reclining couches used at the Last Supper). That one hour taught me much more about the Savior than merely reading the account in the New Testament as I learned about the significance of

what happened the night of the Last Supper, down to where each person sat, what they did, and why that mattered. The powerful teaching of the Savior to Peter, the just-as-powerful example of the Savior's interactions with Judas, and what each position at the table teaches us about the person lying there—yes, lying there. What I learned was both educational and testimony building. The Center is amazing because just about everything we learned was both educational and testimony building.

### Meldrum

One of the memories I will always cherish about the Jerusalem Center was that feeling of complete exhaustion as, having walked from Damascus Gate to the Center's lower gate, my friends and I then sprinted up thirteen flights of stairs to make it to the Oasis for the last ten minutes it was open for dinner. We were always hot and sweaty and arrived in the nick of time. But to sit down to eat completely exhausted after an exciting day of adventures in the Old City provided us with a feeling of accomplishment that was complete and utter bliss. I will also remember fondly the quizzical look I and a number of students received from the faculty when, after they kindly pushed back the start time of our final exams to give the whole student body more time to study and prepare, we told them we were ready to take the test at the original start time so we could get out into the city to explore. Their faces conveyed a sense of complete and utter bewilderment combined with an immense pride at the dedication and excitement of their students on that occasion. Nor, I think, can anyone forget the feeling of jetlag after arriving in the Holy Land and how exhausted we were that first evening, as well as how quickly we proceeded to wake up to the unfamiliar sound of the call to prayer in the early hours of the morning during the first few weeks.

I enjoyed many of the cultural events that were hosted at the Center, from a re-creation of a Jewish Passover Seder with our Judaism professor, to an Arab cultural night with our Arab professor complete with a call to prayer. It was a treat to be able to perform Pachelbel's *Canon in D* for our local neighbors and friends at our closing formal talent show on the Center's beautiful Steinway piano and in front of the famous window that frames a view of the Old City and Dome of the Rock shrine, as well as to laugh at many fond memories and inside jokes at the informal student talent show and closing activity. Of course, the academic opportunities the Center provided were top-notch as well. The opportunity to listen to lectures by individuals on every side of the political spectrum on the issue of Palestinian-Israeli relations helped us better understand

the complexity of the issue and appreciate the nuance and importance of each voice. Personally, I relished the opportunity to help organize and lead group study sessions for some of our classes. Nor was I alone in these efforts, since there was a real sense of comradery and of wanting to help each other succeed among the students. I will also always treasure the opportunity I had to assist Kent Brown with his translation of the Gospel of Luke while I was at the Center, and the excitement that I and another student felt every morning as we met with him to eagerly report some new discovery that we had personally learned in the course of our translating. This is just an example of my interactions with all the faculty, who loved sharing their interests, knowledge, and excitement for their material with us.

I also cherished the wonderful spiritual events that we were privileged to participate in while at the Center. These included our fireside recreating the triclinium setting of the Last Supper and early previews of BYU TV's *Messiah: Behold the Lamb of God*. Of course, who could forget getting to know the members of the local branch, participating with them in Sunday School, and peering out the large window in the Center's auditorium at the famous view of Jerusalem during sacrament meeting? Each was a memorable experience that made the opportunity of living in the Center all the more remarkable and special.

However, I agree with all the other comments that it is really the informal interactions with fellow students that are perhaps the most memorable. One of the things that was fun was going from not knowing anyone and being complete strangers at the beginning of the semester to feeling like you had known these people forever by the end of the program. It was fun to get to learn their personalities on a deeper level and grow to appreciate their talents and many skills. It was always a delight to discover another student who had similar interests—a true moment where, as C. S. Lewis says, you realize, “I thought I was the only one!” and fall into an instant friendship. As a result, it wasn't just the great formal activities the Center had, but some of the impromptu things we were able to organize because of these relationships that were memorable as well: opportunities like deciding to watch the corresponding *Indiana Jones* movies before the field trips to Egypt and Petra or planning field trips to Eilat or Tel Aviv and other sites near Jerusalem that were not included in our field trip itinerary.

I was there in the summer, so together we students decided to put on an impromptu Fourth of July carnival, complete with games and apple bobbing. For the more patriotic moments, we moved indoors where

one student provided us with a recitation of excerpts of Kennedy's inaugural address. I still remember the chills that went down my spine as he recited the words, "My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man," and, "With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking his blessing and his help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own." The words took on a whole new meaning in the Jerusalem Center and after having spent the previous months in the Holy Land. All these experiences were memorable because they were really born out of us students ourselves and reflected the strong sense of community, comradery, and friendship we developed at the Center.

### **Ngatuvai**

For me, the Jerusalem Center architecture was so inspired; it was meant for learning. I felt that at any time of day. My husband also went to Jerusalem in 2013, and we can point out the rooms we each lived in from a picture of the Center by identifying the balcony. A favorite experience for me was to be on my room balcony in the early morning or late at night, looking out at the landscape and, simultaneously, looking in at myself. I could feel such a depth of connection with my Savior that I have probably not felt again other than on my mission or when having a child.

### **Reber**

A favorite activity was attending sacrament meeting in the upper auditorium. Even twenty-six years later, I bow my head during the sacrament and often visualize looking out those giant windows and through the beautiful stone arches at the Old City. It was my favorite place in the Center. I will never forget the sounds of the organ or the Spirit I felt in that room. I'm sure there are many who felt the same way. Also, activities like the student talent shows, eating in the Oasis with friends, or playing basketball games in the gymnasium are full of good memories. My classmates were the best! It was absolutely fabulous.

### **Seely**

We too have favorite memories of life in the Center. In 1990, several years after his first wife's death, President Howard W. Hunter remarried and came to the Jerusalem Center on his honeymoon. We had this group of four sweet boys who serenaded the newlyweds each night.





The gymnasium at the Jerusalem Center. Photograph by Mark Philbrick. Courtesy BYU Jerusalem Center.

(These serenaders actually made it into President Hunter's biography.) Another favorite experience was Halloween because you never knew what the students would think up. Once a group of students dressed up in painted cardboard boxes like Herodian stones. They came out and piled themselves up to make a Herodian wall and then called the nearby Roman soldier to come and knock them over. A favorite time was when the sun set over Jerusalem each evening with all the students out on their balconies or on the seventh-level plaza or in the gardens pretending to read scriptures but in fact just looking at the beauty and the grandeur of Jerusalem.



### Seely

In connection with our study at the Jerusalem Center, we do intensive field trips. At the end of the program when you look at your journal, you realize that you have seen the Holy Land as the Lord said to Abraham in Genesis, "northward, southward, eastward, and westward" (Gen. 13:14). Would you share your favorite two or three memories of field trips?

## Cobb

My husband and I were recently on a twenty-five-year reunion trip, and it was phenomenal. On that trip, we revisited a place that brought back so many memories: Ein Gedi, an oasis near Masada and the Dead Sea. There is nothing else around. It is so lush and beautiful, and there are waterfalls. Back when we were in our twenties, we were practically kids. Having water around, of course, everybody wanted to play, and we were so excited about it. We were not only playing in the water, but we were climbing up on the rocks. I guess this was forbidden, and there was a very angry park ranger who confronted us. Our beloved professor, Paul Peterson, who later returned as a Center administrator, in all his dignity, vigorously defended us to this park ranger. It was not the first but the second time that day that he almost got in a fist fight. The story continues because Professor Brent Top was provoking Professor Peterson and used Professor Peterson's own words by saying, "A lesser man will not get in the water." Professor Peterson was probably the only one not in the water. He was wearing his signature Levi's and immediately, without missing a beat, dropped his clipboard and just walked fully clothed, straight into the waterfall because he would not be a lesser man.

## Elcock

In 1994, we hiked Sinai in the very early morning hours. It was cold and windy, and my knees were achy, but I was determined to make it up early enough to see the sun rise. Turns out my knees held up and I was the first girl up the mountain. It was incredible to watch the sun come up over the Sinai desert to the east and to realize that that was the same place where Moses likely encountered the sun rising and where he received the Ten Commandments. It's these kinds of moments and field trips that strengthened my testimony that the great Jehovah of the Old Testament is that same God who today speaks to our prophet.

Probably one of my favorite experiences occurred recently, when we went back in August for a twenty-five-year reunion trip. We had dinner with our Bedouin bus driver, Mahmud Hazraht. We ate dinner outside his home with his family and grandchildren. His wife made a traditional meal for sixty of us. We watched as Mahmud transformed from bus driver to Bedouin sheik as he put on his kaffiyeh. We had immediate respect as he explained how he ministers to over ten thousand people in his tribe. He brought out a coffee grinder or *mehbash* that had been in his family for over four hundred years. The grinder was

used to grind coffee but was also used as a percussion instrument. Using the ancient grinder, he made a rhythmic welcoming tune, the sound of hospitality. To spend that time with Mahmud and his lovely family will not soon be forgotten.

### **Gilbert**

Sinai was incredible. I also loved Egypt. I particularly remember when going to the tombs and the temples as an endowed member of the Church, my jaw dropped because I was seeing things I didn't think I should be seeing on the walls and ceilings. It was incredible! Learning from our professors as they taught us on-site about such ancient history blew my mind. Here in the U.S., 300 or 400 years is old, but there you're at sites where there are temples well past 2,000 or 3,000 years old. I remember sitting in a Holy of Holies at one of the Egyptian temples where Professor Skinner made a profound and thought-provoking comment about how we were literally seeing fragments of the truth. He said that it's obvious from what we were seeing from those ancient civilizations that Adam and Eve really did start with all the truth. Over time that truth has been fragmented, but we see it pop up in all the different major religions of the world.

Also, the Jerusalem experience isn't complete without the Galilee. It was just so incredible! I loved that when you were on or near the Sea of Galilee, anywhere you looked you were looking at a story from the New Testament, seeing what Jesus saw. Before going there, I had never realized that Galilee is where the Savior actually lived and taught most of his life. I remember sunrises and sunsets at Galilee—all in all, such an incredible experience.

### **Meldrum**

All the field trips were memorable in different ways. I loved the ruins at Jerash and Caesarea Maritima as well as the excitement of rafting down the Jordan River and hiking through Dan. It was surreal to stand on Masada, and I cherished seeing the Mount of Transfiguration and reading the scriptures at the Synagogue Church in Nazareth or at the ruins of the synagogue in Capernaum. I will always remember sprinting ahead of the group in excitement upon seeing the tip of the Treasury over the next ridge in Petra, as well as turning around in my seat at the end of our visit and seeing an entire busload of young and healthy college students completely exhausted and asleep due to the heat and the

day's excitement. However, of all the field trips, two really stand out for their lasting impact.

One was going to Mount Sinai in Egypt. It was amazing to get up at 4:00 a.m., long before dawn, to see the whole Milky Way laid out like I had never seen it before. My mind immediately recalled the scripture when God shows Moses the whole of his creation. I think it is the closest I have ever been to an experience like that. We then had to hike up the mountain while dodging the large number of camels carrying tourists who opted not to make the hike. However, it was worth it to see an amazing sunrise. For me, the real highlight came afterward when we then followed the path down to St. Catherine's Monastery. At that marvelous site, we saw a remarkable museum with some of the treasures of the monastery. Included were a copy of the Bible—the Codex Sinaiticus—that Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, the great historian of Christianity, prepared for the Emperor Constantine and the enchanting and beautiful icons that predate the eighth-century Byzantine iconoclastic controversy. It was just amazing to be that close to history. At some points, I swear I had to remind myself to close my mouth and breathe. In fact, I was so caught up in the moment that I somehow missed the last Center bus back to our hotel. So, after snapping the last of my pictures of the monastery's iconic exterior, I hailed one of the many cabs waiting nearby and showed them the card we had been given with the address of the hotel. I made it back in time to grab my luggage and get it onto the bus without a problem. I don't think anyone even noticed I had arrived late. I did miss some of the extra downtime we had to swim in the hotel pool, but I think that was a fair tradeoff, on the whole.

A second one I'll never forget was going down one Friday evening to see the Jews welcome in the Sabbath at the Western Wall. It was amazing to watch as the Yeshiva boys came marching down right at sunset, walking in rows linked arm in arm. Everyone, from the Yishiva students to Israeli soldiers, started different circle dances traditional of the region, just like you see in *The Prince of Egypt* or *Fiddler on the Roof*. Then came the Haredi with their long side curls, tall rounded fur hats, dark suits, and white tassels, bowing and praying toward the Wall. It was my first time visiting the Western Wall, and it was unlike anything I had ever experienced—religious or otherwise. These are two field trips that I will never forget.

However, as memorable as our official field trips were, the unofficial "field trips" that we students could organize on our own by virtue of living in Jerusalem and connecting with the city were even more unforgettable. I will always remember when a group of us decided to join the weekly Friday pilgrimage of the Franciscan friars down the Via

Dolorosa and watched the faithful carrying wooden crosses in remembrance of the Crucifixion. When we reached the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, one of the Franciscans we had befriended, Father Angelo, invited us to stay to watch the evening procession around the Aedicule—the Tomb of Christ. Afterward, Father Angelo gave some of us copies of the prayer service, written in Latin, and then took us in to see the Franciscan Custos's private chapel. We took a picture with Father Angelo in front of the Church, which he subsequently used in a Catholic magazine article on his ministry. A Franciscan and a bunch of BYU Jerusalem Center students, complete with blue bookbags! Whenever I see the image, I can't help but smile and think fondly on the experience and the loving kindness and generosity of Father Angelo.

On another unofficial field trip, some of us were able to arrange a tour of the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque. Visiting those remarkable sites is something every student hopes to achieve but is difficult because both sites in recent times have been closed to the public. However, while I was in country, my mother did some research and discovered a local part-time tour guide, a Palestinian Christian with connections to the Mufti's office through his work, who would occasionally take his tour groups into the Dome. I reached out to him, and we worked through the entire semester to try to set something up. Despite some setbacks, on our last free day of the semester, ten of us were able to connect with him and tour these holy sites. I could hardly contain my excitement, and I don't think any of the students that were there will ever forget standing beneath the dome at the third holiest site in Islam. It was beautiful and breathtaking—a remarkable opportunity and, I firmly believe, a miraculous answer to a fervent, if not somewhat childish, prayer. Nevertheless, it is also an experience I reflect on with the utmost respect, if not reverence, whenever I think of Islam and its holy sites, and it has helped to endear the faith to me.

Another of my favorite unofficial field-trip experiences was visiting the Orthodox Church of Saint John the Baptist—a small church in the Christian Quarter of the city. It was often closed, but one day, five of us—all boys—happened to walk by when it was open. I immediately told the group we had to pop our heads in, and we had fun seeing the beautiful icons on the walls of the church. We started taking pictures when a gruff old Greek Orthodox priest, Father Theophanes, barked at us, "No pictures!" Dutifully, we put our cameras away. As we continued to poke around, one member of the group went over and started a conversation with Father Theophanes. The rest of us soon joined in the conversation, and we spent the next hour or so talking with him as he explained the

beliefs of the Orthodox faith, why the church was constructed the way it was, and what the icons meant. It was an absolute delight to converse with him about his beliefs.

One of our teachers, an avid photographer, heard about our visit to this church, which he had never been in before. He subsequently stopped by to try to take a look. He too started taking pictures, only to be told off by Father Theophanes. However, unlike us, this teacher pushed back a little. He told the Father, "But you let my students take pictures here the other day." To which Father Theophanes said, "Students? What students?" The professor quickly helped him understand that the five young men with whom he had visited the day before were his students from the Jerusalem Center, to which Father Theophanes exclaimed, "Such good boys! Such good boys!" With Father Theophanes's blessing, the professor then took some pictures of the church, copies of which we later gave to Father Theophanes so he could sell them as post cards to help raise revenue to maintain the building.

This professor also helped us pave the way with the Jerusalem Center administration to take Father Theophanes up on his invitation to return to see the church at night. It was an exciting experience, since we were not allowed to visit the Old City after dark. At the appointed time, our group, which had now grown to about fifteen students and four faculty members, piled into a bus and headed for the Jaffa Gate. From there we walked through the deserted streets to the church. There, Father Theophanes greeted us and showed us his beautiful little church, illuminated by the flickering light of a small strand of eight oil lamps. It was a beautiful sight. One of the faculty suggested that we should sing the hymn "Lead Kindly Light." We asked Father Theophanes if we could, and he said with a wink that although he was not supposed to, he would close the door, and no one would ever know. The song echoed beautifully off the Church's small rotunda.

On our last day in the city, some of us made a point of stopping by the church to say goodbye to Father Theophanes. We exchanged pleasantries and told him we were leaving. In his somewhat broken English, he asked where we were going and what we were going to do when we got home. He then asked when we would be back to Jerusalem. We told him we were not sure, but we hoped to return someday. To which he wished us well and said he hoped that we would be able to return and that he would still be there when we did. I think I walked out of the church with moist eyes, and I will always remember the brief friendship I had with an Orthodox priest and that we had made an impact in his

life. These field trip experiences—both official and unofficial—are what the Jerusalem Center is all about. They are the ones that change you deep down in the soul and that you remember and cherish forever.

### Ngatuvai

I'm so glad someone mentioned Egypt, but if I talk about it I'll weep because visiting there meant so much to me. I know many contracted something there that they never want to remember, but my memories of Egypt are full of fascination and awe. Thinking back, it is amazing that I even made it there.

I was speaking with my brother, who also came with me to Jerusalem (which was a choice experience in and of itself), and for us, the most memorable site was the Garden Tomb, and how essential it was for the two of us to visit it each Saturday because we knew we wouldn't get that back. We knew we wouldn't have an opportunity like that again to visit Gethsemane or the Garden Tomb each Sabbath.

### Reber

My favorite in-country field trip was to the Galilee. It's just so pristine. I looked at the lay of the land, and I thought of it as being really similar to what Jesus looked at with his own eyes. It's one of the areas in Israel that I don't feel has changed much. I had some very spiritual experiences on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. One I would like to share happened on our reunion trip led by Brent Top and Jeff Chadwick:

I will never forget walking by myself back to the bus after Professor Top had finished teaching us on the shore of Galilee about Peter going back to his old life after the Savior was crucified. The Savior came to him and asked him three times if he loved him, and Peter said, "Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee." Then FEED MY SHEEP! How grateful Peter must have been to be able to regain his conviction and show the Lord his dedication after his three denials of Christ in Jerusalem. He was a committed disciple. I had studied Elder Holland's account of this event that he gave in general conference just a couple of months prior to our visit. That preparation, as well as what was taught to me that afternoon, really had me pondering as I walked alone back to the bus. I was so impressed by the Spirit that I stopped in my tracks, and, with tears in my eyes and my body trembling, I looked toward the gate where the buses were parked, and I distinctly had the impression: *Rick, as you walk through that gate and leave here like Peter did, go and feed his sheep!* I thought that the Savior



wouldn't have had any different message for me than he had had for Peter. The Spirit was so strong in such an odd place. There I was on a paved path leaving the beautiful grounds at St. Peter's Primacy. As I neared the bus, I turned and actually walked back and took a photo of the gate and path I was on because it represents one of my "sacred spots" on this earth. I am grateful to have several of those spots, but this was a recent one.

For out-of-country field trips, I will never forget the sunrise on top of Mount Sinai, probably because it's the only sunrise I've ever seen in my life. I'm not really a morning person, but I was pretty proud of myself for waking up and hiking to the top of the mountain in the dark. The testimony meeting midway down the mountain on the way back is also a very powerful memory.

### Seely

One of my favorite memories of field trips is also climbing Mount Sinai. When you climb Mount Sinai early, early in the morning with 172 people, you quickly see there are all kinds of people in the group. First, you have a group of tough and energetic guys that are going to be the first ones up, and then you have a group of guys who wait behind to make sure that everybody gets to the top for the sunrise. Once when we got to the top, I noticed a group of students quietly and reverently removing their shoes—because they understood the meaning of the scriptures they were reading about Moses when he met the Lord there.

Another of my favorite memories was the time when my wife, Jo Ann, was hired to be a religion teacher and got to direct her own field-trip bus for the semester. I had the experience of being a bus director's spouse. One of the challenging things about field trips in the Holy Land is visiting the many tels, and after a dozen tels you realize that they may be considered an acquired taste. My wife's students made up a five-verse song about our field trips. I'm only able to sing you one verse. (Sung to the tune of "Far, Far Away on Judea's Plains")

Come bus number four to the top of the tel,  
Rocks and boulders, oh how swell.  
What the tel, what the tel,  
What the tel are we climbing?  
Rocks and boulders, oh how swell.  
Climb another hill, oh what the tel.





## Seely

Connected with our experiences at the Center, we're part of a truly rigorous academic experience. We study scripture. We study the Palestinian narrative. We study the Jewish narrative. We have a hardcore course on ancient Near Eastern history and culture that goes from 4,000 BC almost to modern times. We thought it would be fun for you to share your favorite teaching moments.

## Cobb

All my most spiritual experiences as a student in the Holy Land happened with my Old and New Testament classes. The experience I recall the most vividly happened away from our traditional class meetings. We met at Professor Top's home in Jerusalem one night for a closing party with our Old Testament class. After celebrating our semester together, Professor Top and his wife, Wendy, sat us down in the living room and told us about death, as they had just completed a book on the subject. As a twenty-year-old, my first thought was that the subject didn't apply much to me. Then not long into the discussion, I realized that this was actually not only enlightening but a pivotal discussion for me. Citing scripture, they put our minds at ease about the death experience and opened my mind and heart with a deeper understanding of what each human will experience. Since that evening, I have always felt like I have a better understanding of the spirit world and of my Heavenly Father's love for me. I am not sure that I could have endured as well the premature deaths of both my mother and my brother had I not had this profound learning moment in an unusual setting prior to losing them. I am grateful that there are opportunities in the program where we can get to know and learn from both the students and the teachers in uncommon ways and in uncommon settings.

## Elcock

My favorite teaching moments didn't always happen in the classroom per se. Sadly, the Egypt portion of our semester was canceled, and we had two weeks that opened up due to this change in plans. In lieu of Egypt, for one week we participated in an archaeological dig at Tel Ekron with Professor Jeff Chadwick and Professor Ann E. Killebrew as leaders. We worked hard on that dig. We scrubbed sherds, we labeled them, we swept the dirt in 110-degree weather for a solid week. It was a great and unusual experience as we learned a lot about biblical archeology.

The other week was spent working in the banana fields in the north at Afikim, an Israeli kibbutz near the Sea of Galilee. We would take a truck ride early in the morning to the banana fields. Using Ginzu-type knives, we trimmed back the banana tree fronds. We discovered banana leaves can be quite sharp like knives. The labor started in the early morning and went until about four or five in the afternoon. It was good, hard work, and I think it was really valuable and humbling for us to work like that. We ate lunch in the communal dining hall and spent dinners with the kibbutz families. It was unlike anywhere I've ever spent my time: to be on a kibbutz working all day and participating with the families at night. It was fascinating to watch as bikes, tools, homes, and even child-care were communal and actually shared on the kibbutz.

### **Gilbert**

I remember going to Dan with Professor Roy Huff. At Dan, idol worship dominated the culture, and it was near here (at Caesarea Philippi, a pagan site) that the Savior taught Peter he would be the rock upon which the Savior would build the church. Reading the scriptures on site, seeing what Peter would have seen, and knowing how powerful the Savior's teaching to Peter would have been, given the physical presence of what was before him, were so significant to me. Caesarea Philippi sits on a huge rock. And it was meaningful to realize just how well the Savior literally taught using the things around him. So many of my favorite teaching moments came from being on-site and having that kind of experience. The Savior taught about a coin falling in the crack, which may not mean much to us, but being in a home where this could have happened and seeing why losing a coin this way was significant to the people of that time changed the story and added depth and meaning. So, in Dan and Caesarea facing this mountainous rock, I was struck that Peter must have felt both the weight of responsibility and the peace of the Savior guiding and teaching him. Peter would have realized, both symbolically and literally, the importance of little "r" rock and big "R" Rock, the Savior being the big "R," and Peter, as the Apostle, being the little "r." As I learned about Peter and the specific responsibility he was given, I felt impressed that we all have a specific role, and that the Savior is our guide to find what that is and to accomplish all that he asks of us. I am so grateful for those little and big moments where the scriptures came alive in a way that I hadn't experienced with the Bible before.

## Meldrum

There were numerous experiences both in class and out of class that were phenomenal. All our BYU faculty were amazing, and it was a privilege to learn from them and share their excitement about geography, history, and the scriptures, especially on sites. I enjoyed learning from our local faculty and hearing their unique perspectives on Jewish and Islamic history as well as the conflict in the Holy Land. However, one of the “teaching moments” that stands out the most was with Kent Brown, who was the Center’s director when I was there. Professor Brown was working on his commentary on the Gospel of Luke for the BYU New Testament Commentary Series. Every Saturday, he would do a fireside on the Gospel of Luke as a means of working through his thoughts and sharing his insights with us. It was always a packed classroom, and we would take an hour to get through about six verses. At the end, you wanted it to go on for another five hours. I think it was that experience where I really learned how to see what Luke was saying and to feast on the scriptures. It was just paradigm shifting and something I have tried to apply in my own life and gospel study ever since.

I also remember fondly being on the other end of the spectrum when we made our field trip to the Galilee. One of our excursions was to take a boat from the resort where we were staying to the other side of the lake. The tradition was to ask the boat driver to stop in the middle of the sea, where a student was asked to share a brief spiritual thought on the Savior’s miracles on the water. For our group, I was asked to deliver the thought. I remember preparing and delving into the narratives, trying to really understand what the Gospel authors were trying to say. Then, when the day came and the boat stopped, I stood up and delivered my thought. I don’t recall anything in particular that I said on the occasion. However, I always remember feeling a deep sense of humility as I realized that for that brief moment, I was literally doing what Jesus had done—teaching in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. In a country where so many of the religious sites are disputed by the various sects, it was the closest I could probably come to saying I had actually stood where Jesus had stood. The experience makes the phrase “trying to be like Jesus” resonate with a whole new meaning and reality and is a reminder to me of what it means to be a disciple of Christ and to continue to figuratively do as he did.

## Ngatuvai

I think I've just been fortunate to have Jerusalem as a shared experience with my brother, and then I married someone who also went winter semester of 2013. We have been able to have some amazing conversations since. While this isn't my memory, this is something that has made an impression on me from my husband's journal. I won't say it exactly right, but his group was in a devotional where they simulated what the Upper Room would have been like when Christ established the sacrament. President Uchtdorf, who was visiting Jerusalem with his family, shared some impromptu sacred thoughts with the students about his relationship with the Savior and the power of the sacrament. I thought, what an amazing teaching moment that had to have been, and it has really affected my husband's testimony and our family. I was blessed with Professors Huff, Skinner, and Brown, and many other great teachers. I just think it is a concentrated and consecrated time of learning. There are so many moments; I really couldn't pick one, but that's one that stood out to me and stays with my family.

## Reber

A favorite teaching moment for me happened in Shepherds' Field. It was late in fall semester. I think we were getting into December and it was early in the evening. The wind was blowing enough to be noticed, and purple clouds were rolling in over the horizon. The lights were coming on from the top of the hill in Bethlehem. Professor Top read from Luke 2, and we reenacted the Christmas story. The scripture says, "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:13–14). Professor Top stopped, and he looked at us and said, "I'd like you to consider that this might not be your first time in Shepherds' Field. We may have been a part of that heavenly host. We probably didn't have anything better going on that night." That was so powerful when he said that to us, and the spirit was so strong. It's something I've never forgotten, and every Christmas I think and share thoughts from my experience in Shepherds' Field.

As we left that night, it was getting cold and dark. There was a Bedouin mother with a lot of little kids watching our group board the bus. I watched a classmate of mine, who has a heart as big as anyone I know, quietly sneak away, take off her soft, cozy, yellow sweatshirt, give it to this mother, and then hop back on the bus. To me, it was just such a

fitting end to such a spiritual evening. My friend taught me in a quiet way the true meaning of Christmas. I could only smile as we drove away and I looked back to see this mother already wearing this bright yellow sweatshirt that stood out in the grey and white evening shadows. That was a good moment.



## Seely

We go to Jerusalem not as tourists but as pilgrims. A wise man said about pilgrimage: “Tourists pass through places, but pilgrims let places pass through them, allowing their hearts to be changed.”<sup>1</sup> And a twentieth-century Welsh poet, R. S. Thomas, expressed the central purpose of pilgrimage: “The point of travelling is not to arrive but to return home laden with pollen you shall work up into honey the mind feeds on.”<sup>2</sup>

Please tell us about the impact that the Jerusalem Center experience has had on your life, small or great.

## Cobb

I think that the great irony of the experience at the Jerusalem Center is that you know you’re doing something special when you’re there, but you don’t realize just how special it is and what kind of an impact it will have on your life. I think it had a great impact on my life back then, but I feel like it just continues to impact my life over and over again. When we went on our reunion trip, we were at the Garden of Gethsemane on our final day, which was the Sabbath. I had the most extraordinary thing happen to me as Professor Top was speaking: I received an answer to a prayer that I had made to my Heavenly Father twenty-five years before in room 306 in the Jerusalem Center. As I looked out over the Garden of Gethsemane, through the Kidron Valley, I sincerely wanted an answer, and I didn’t really feel like my answer was completely satisfactory. But that morning last August, I felt so much that my Heavenly Father loves me. He is aware of me now, and he was aware of me twenty-five years ago. It just echoed the emotions and the circumstances through my

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1. Peter J. Miano, “Pilgrimage or Tourism,” *The Society for Biblical Studies*, September 30, 2009, accessed October 2, 2020, [http://www.sbsedu.org/L3\\_e\\_newsletter30.9.09/PilgrimageTourismB.htm](http://www.sbsedu.org/L3_e_newsletter30.9.09/PilgrimageTourismB.htm).

2. R. S. Thomas, *Collected Poems 1945–1990* (London: Phoenix Giant, 1995), 293.

life where I had felt like prayers were answered. The things that I had experienced in the Jerusalem Center brought opportunities to my life and taught me important lessons. I feel incredibly impacted by it, and I feel that every day. I can't seem to let go of the experience I had twenty-five years ago because it made such a huge impact on my life. I met my husband in the Oasis, so there's that too. Meeting my husband on the program was the best and most impactful part.

### **Elcock**

I've been blessed by the Holy Land twice, once as a twenty-year-old girl and again just a few months ago. I think the experiences from a few months ago were maybe even more impactful for me because I appreciated them more. When we were first married, I begged my husband for us to go back as a married couple because I longed to share the Jerusalem experience with him. It just wasn't in the cards for us. Try as I might, the timing just wasn't right. However, Heavenly Father knew the desire of my heart. Fast forward twenty-five years, and we heard about a trip with our original instructors, Brent Top and Jeff Chadwick, leading the tour. I knew that this tour could not be duplicated, and so we pulled the trigger, and I'm so glad that we did. Going back to the upper auditorium at the Jerusalem Center and seeing the Old City again was like Christmas for me, especially to be there with my husband. Our culminating site activity with the group was at the Garden Tomb. We sat and shared scripture and sang hymns and my eyes could not stop leaking. I was full to the brim with the Spirit and gratitude to my Heavenly Father for this incredible experience. I knew in that moment that my Heavenly Father had answered a long-held prayer and fulfilled the desire of my heart to go back to the Holy Land with my husband. It was such a sweet experience that I will never forget. When you are part of a group of like-minded people studying the Old and New Testaments, walking where the Savior walked and examining the cultures and the deep-seated conflict in Jerusalem, it tends to draw people together. Jerusalem knits hearts together. I felt like Heavenly Father's hand was in so many of the small and large details of our trip and my original Jerusalem Center experience. I am knit and bound to a number of people because of Jerusalem. These experiences have molded me. They have changed me as an individual forever. They have changed how I view the world. I have a greater capacity to love others and observe people that are different from me in a new way. Most importantly, these experiences in

Israel have increased my testimony of my Savior Jesus Christ. For that I am eternally grateful.

### **Gilbert**

I remember going to Gethsemane or the Garden Tomb each Sabbath and seeing many other Christians from different churches and different countries. We often sang while we were there and always tried to include more common Christian songs like “How Great Thou Art” or “Be Still My Soul.” I was amazed and humbled each time those from around the world joined us in their language with their own ways of praising our God, some very different from our own. I felt such a connection with these people. I gained a great respect for the millions of good people out there who worship the best way they know how. I saw this demonstration of faith repeatedly as we walked through the Holy Land, and it had a significant impact on me both spiritually and culturally and has continued to shape my interactions around the world. As a result, a yearning to experience more of this world and its people awoke within me. Now, when I travel to other countries, I can’t just be a tourist. Sometimes I even miss popular tourist locations altogether, and I’m okay with that, because I have a richer experience when I interact more with the people. Learning from and being taught by other cultures and religions is edifying and inspiring in ways that we don’t get when we just focus on what we know around us—I am a better person because of it.

My experience at the Center has shaped me in so many ways, but the spiritual experiences and connection I felt with the Savior are what I treasure above all else. I remember sitting on my balcony one day at the Center and feeling incredibly alone. In that moment I was feeling that, even though I was surrounded by a large group of really great people, no one *really* knew me. I think we all have moments like this when we need to know heaven is aware and knows who we are. As I looked out at the Old City, a thought crossed my mind and a feeling of peace filled my whole soul as I realized that the Savior too had experienced such a feeling. He too had walked the streets of Jerusalem, surrounded by hundreds, even thousands of people at times, yet he had also felt loneliness, had felt that no one truly comprehended him or the work he was here to do. I was struck by the connection I felt with my Savior and Elder Brother in that moment. I knew then and still know that he knows me and what I’m feeling. I can still feel what I felt that day on my balcony, and my testimony of this great truth has continued to grow since. He knows us. He is real. His

life was and is real. And the entire purpose of it all is to bless, to heal, to comfort, and to redeem us. There is no better study abroad than the one that connects us more profoundly with our Savior and teaches us in such a real way of his incredible life.

### **Meldrum**

I can directly say that my current interest in early Christianity and love of the New Testament has come from my time in Jerusalem and the opportunity I had to see the sites and learn about the scriptures and Christian history from the amazing faculty I had. I think I can trace my interest in doing interfaith work directly back to the opportunity I had to interact with the multiple faith communities in Israel, some of which we in the Church and in the West never hear of. More fundamentally, I think the opportunity to study the scriptures with some amazing faculty and students and to see the sites where these great experiences of faith happened really helps one gain a perspective on how to answer that great riddle of reconciling Jerusalem and Athens—faith and reason—and on how to become a disciple scholar. In addition, ultimately, I think partaking of the spirit of the place—the Center itself, the faculty, the students, the sites both Christian and non-Christian—and seeing the acts of pure devotion and faith of people up at the Dome of the Rock or in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher or at the Garden Tomb or at the Western Wall inspires one to want to be a better disciple and to want to exercise greater faith in Christ and our Heavenly Father. Like all pilgrims, I think I can firmly say that I have come back from Jerusalem changed for the better in every aspect of my life. It's an experience for which I am increasingly grateful, that I will never forget, that I will always cherish, and that I hope will continue to be a guiding light in my life.

### **Ngatuvai**

We had our ten-year reunion a couple of weeks ago, and something one of my friends shared has stayed with me. She said, "I just don't feel like I appreciated it like I do now. It's like this jewel of an experience that I just pull out and I look at. Now I see all the facets and how brilliant it was." This program is so transformative; in order to have an experience that transcends boundaries of faith and to feel actual peace in Jerusalem, I think this Center is set apart where you feel so safe from the storm and you get to see things how perhaps the Lord would see them. It continues to be a choice experience for learning and enlightenment



all throughout my life. I think, similar to a mission, it is a place you are set apart to connect with the Savior. It is sacred ground, as we heard from Elder Holland earlier this afternoon. It's amazing to even know that we got to touch that. One other thing I want to share is that when I returned from Jerusalem ten years ago everybody kept asking, "Tell us about Jerusalem. You walked where the Savior walked." I would tell them that while that is magnificent, I also learned while being there that you don't have to go there to know that Jesus is real; you can surround yourself with believers and be a believer yourself. That's been a very humbling and unforgettable realization I've held tightly to, to know that he is real. That can happen anywhere, but to have a time and a place set aside where you can really dive in, that is something that will never leave. Jerusalem was the first thing that bonded my husband and me while dating and has made such an impact on our family and the way we communicate our testimonies and lead our lives. So, thanks to all of you who have made the BYU Jerusalem program and center so great.

## **Reber**

I've always considered my experience at the Jerusalem Center one of the biggest foundation stones in my testimony, next to my mission in Alabama. Being here today has really made me appreciate, even more, the spirit of this building. When Elder Holland said earlier today that we don't know the full capacity of what the Center has to offer or what its history really will hold, that really resonates with me. I think we all have a deep love for the Center, for the spirit of the Center, for the teachings, and for the way the scriptures have come to life. In my eyes as I read, I picture the lay of the land, the sights, the smells, the sounds. I always seem to be walking in Israel somewhere as I study. I would like to just really say thank you to all of you in this room who have fought to make the Center what it is. I am a total byproduct of that building and the Jerusalem Center study abroad program. Twenty-six years ago, literally, I was sitting there. Julie and April mentioned that some of us got the chance to go back on a twenty-five-year reunion tour. I met my wife at the Center twenty-six years ago. We never would have thought, walking back through the doors of the Center all these years later, that we would experience the emotion that we felt flooding over us. We were absolutely blown away. It was so surreal; it seemed like we were just there and we had never left. The Center looks, feels, and smells as brand new as it did twenty-six years ago. They've kept that place immaculate. I turned left while everybody else went right to go down to the upper auditorium for

our tour. I just bawled because I was so thankful for my Jerusalem Center experience then and to be back again. I want to keep the Holy Land with me forever. I won't say I'm not going to go back, because I very well might. I'm thankful, and I want to thank everybody in this room who made and continues to make the Jerusalem Center what it is today.

### Seely

I remember walking on a field trip with my little boy. He was holding my hand and looking at the group of students in front of us, and he said to me, "Dad, just think, those are *our* students." I want you to know that our children have always been fiercely proud of you as "our students." I sent all our children an email a couple of weeks ago and asked, "What are your favorite memories of the students at the Center?" When you go as a family, there are lots of memories of the experience in the Holy Land, but this question was just about the experience with students. I got ten pages. Here are a couple of things that we all remember. We loved watching the students do service: painting a rainbow on the wall at the Princess Basma School, assembling humanitarian aid kits in the garage, feeding the newborn babies at the Princess Basma School, Palestinian night at the Center. We love hearing our students sing: at sacrament meeting in the Center, in Hezekiah's tunnel, in the banana fields at the kibbutz, in Saint Anne's, in the Bell Caves, at Shepherds' Field, in the boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, in the concerts, on Palm Sunday going over to the Mount of Olives, and singing "Oh, Happy Day" at the Garden Tomb on Easter morning to a rock band. Let me tell you, you haven't lived until you've done that.

At the end of our experience with the Jerusalem Center, we learned something sobering: our experience at the Jerusalem Center was not an adventure just in space, but it was an adventure in time. And while we can return to visit Jerusalem, and we can return to visit the Jerusalem Center, we can never go back to this time together in this special place. The time we were there remains as an oasis in our lives, an oasis of fond memories, of happy times, of being together, and of feeling the Spirit. And when we come home through the years we say, "Who can forget Jerusalem? Who can ever forget our time at the Jerusalem Center?"